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editorial

Australia is a suburban nation. By the turn of the century it had one of the highest levels of home ownership in the world; levels which were not reached in Canada for 20 years; in the USA for 50 years and in Britain until 1971. As a result of the Australian ideal of a free-standing house on a quarter-acre block, the nation today possesses one of the largest urban populations in the world.

Some now argue the costs involved in maintaining the Australian ideal, in providing the infrastructure to support new urban areas, is too great. They propose the development of urban consolidation policies. Many, however, believe the development of these urban consolidation policies, and the redevelopment of existing suburbs, will impact on our understanding of Australia’s cities and the cultural heritage values ascribed to them. They question how the transition from our inherited form to a new urban structure will be managed; how new patterns of development within our landscapes and the inherited form of our cities will be accommodated, and what will be the impact on communities?

This issue of Historic Environment focuses on the social and heritage impact of urban consolidation. It includes select papers delivered at the Australia ICOMOS Melbourne conference held on the 21 – 24 March 1996. Although all the papers delivered at the conference were of a high calibre, regrettably limited space precluded their total inclusion.

The Victorian Minister for Planning, The Honourable Robert Maclellan MLA, delivered the conference’s opening address, outlining the Victorian Government’s current attitude towards urban consolidation. The other key-note speakers were Professor Graeme Davison, who outlined the reason why Australian cities sprawled more than their European or American counterparts, and considered the ramifications of the heritage movement in encouraging urban sprawl; Professor Patrick Troy, who focused on the social impact of urban consolidation policies; Margo Huxley, through her personal experience of inner-city living, reflected on the wider issues of urban development and urban policy; and Chris Maher examined urban consolidation in the context of contemporary development trends and the notion of urban consolidation as a perceived panacea for the evils of urban sprawl. A panel consisting of Rod Fehring, Tony Sabino and Barry Young discussed the contemporary benefits and pitfalls of applying urban consolidation policies.

The issues raised by the conference resulted in lively debate and provided a forum to discuss this very important subject. Australia ICOMOS hopes the publication in Historic Environment of some of the papers delivered at its Melbourne conference in March 1996 will continue to foster discussion on the subject of urban consolidation.